

The Clown



and

The Clown

The clown and the clown by Bittersw33tCarousel

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Summary: When little Momo, a circus artist, coincidentally explores Derry's sewer tunnels, she doesn't expect to find an eerie wounded monster in there. Momo doesn't get scared and doesn't hesitate to help that bizarre creature, but she doesn't realize the danger she is courting by doing that...

1. Chapter 1 - Beastly snarl

Author's note: Well, this is the English translation of my story. Since I'm not an English native speaker, I would greatly appreciate if someone pointed out eventual mistakes to me. Also, any other form of constructive criticism will be welcomed.

Disclaimer: I suppose there's no real need to tell you that I don't own anything you recognize, which belongs to the great Stephen King. And my OC's name, Momo, is a tribute to *Momo* by Michael Ende, one of my favourite novels.

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"COME BACK IMMEDIATELY, YOU LITTLE THIEF! WHEN I CATCH YOU, YOU'RE SO DEAD!"

Followed by that furious voice, little Momo kept running and running, leaving the outskirts of the small city and entering the surrounding forest. She somersaulted past a fallen tree trunk in the middle of the street, landed swiftly on its other side and proceeded until she stood before the mouth of a giant pipe which was evidently the outlet of some sewer: the child lingered just one moment before she quickly and quietly went in.

In the moldy and trash-smelling gloomy atmosphere, Momo stopped for a second, waiting for her eyes to get used to the darkness. She couldn't hear anything anymore outside, so she let herself relax a little.

After a while, she cautiously followed the tunnel, careful not to lose her footing and, above all, to avoid walking in the dirty water with her brand-new, black satin shoes: she didn't want to give Popsy another reason to get angry, even though she knew his furies, as violent as they were, never lasted too long. You just had to stay hidden for a few hours, waiting for him to cool down, and then you could go back to the camp as if nothing happened. Momo often did just that; it was very rare an occurrence for Popsy to be able to catch her and, once his anger passed, everything went back exactly the way it was.

While she proceeded in the almost total darkness, Momo drew from her backpack the goods she just stole, which were the very cause of her guardian's fury: some freshly baked, chocolate-covered donuts in a little colored carton box. They were still warm from the oven.

The child took one and, when she bit it, she couldn't help a little moan of pleasure: she was sure nothing in the whole world was comparable to Maruska's sweets. Really, it was no wonder Popsy always tried to keep them all to himself.

At some point, the child accidentally hit something with her foot, and to the touch it revealed itself to be a shoe. Looking around in the dark, Momo barely noticed various other scattered clothing items.

This new discovery made her very curious. *Maybe I found the Clothes-Stealing Goblin's home*, she thought.

After a while, the tunnel made a turn, which left the kid groping for a wall.

Dark places did not frighten her: she was quite used to them. She often happened to traverse wild, solitary lands, together with the circus she was a part of, and it wasn't unusual, during such travels, to lack battery and lamp oil supplies, in which case you had to make do with what you had: if you weren't lucky enough to find some wood and make yourself a torch, and you couldn't even count on a bright night, you had to deal with business in the dark. Momo learned how to minimize the risk of accidents and see her way using almost exclusively her sense of touch, hearing and smelling.

After a several minutes walk, the child stood before a much brighter place: it was a huge room into which flew many other great pipes just like the one she came from. The room had a very high ceiling and, in its middle, Momo saw an actual *mountain* of amassed objects which, she noticed while approaching, were all toys and children's clothes.

Delighted, the child skipped even nearer to examine that pile: by now, she was certain she found the Clothes-Stealing Goblin's lair.

But seems like he loves toys too, she thought, collecting some old wooden balls from the pile. They were painted with different, bright

colors, but the paint was starting to peel off. The kid begun to juggle them, running a part of which was to be her performance of that evening; Momo was quite proud of her progress as a juggler.

While she was intent on her passtime, her eyes fell on which was unequivocally a circus wagon, leaning against a wall in the big room. Momo stopped the juggling balls without dropping them, and she curiously approached.

It's like Pablo's one!, she thought.

Pablo was her circus' beast tamer.

This wagon, however, was much older than Pablo's, and it seemed like it was abandoned for long. On its side was elaborately painted the writing "Pennywise".

Leaving the juggling balls on one of the doorsteps, Momo tried to open the front door of the wagon, but it didn't budge: it was locked, and the same could be said for the windows.

A little disappointed, the child decided to continue her exploration, and she headed to one of the many pipes flowing in the big room she stood into.

I still can't go back to camp, she said to herself. *I have to wait till I am sure Popsy is no more angry.*

After an hesitation, Momo went back to the wagon's doorsteps to retrieve the five wooden balls, and she entertained herself by juggling them while she proceded into the tunnel.

One step after another, soon Momo realized there wasn't all that much to see, in that sewer: the most interesting place was doubtlessly the huge room with the circus wagon and that mountain of clothes and toys. She couldn't find the smallest trace of the Clothes-Stealing Goblin, and otherwise, the only thing the could see were pipes which in certain points were closed by grates, preventing her from going any further, but even when they weren't blocked, they merely lead to other pipes.

Momo was about to go back – maybe, amongst the pile of toys she

would be able to find something cute to entertain herself –, when she heard a deep growl and she stopped dead.

Sounds like a tiger, she thought. Maybe, that wagon's owner is a beast tamer like Pablo...

As she was not afraid of dark places, the little circus artist wasn't afraid of wild beasts, which she was used to interact each day with.

She walked slower, her senses on high alert, while she approached the source of that noise.

After a downhill stretch, Momo found herself before some kind of circular room with a high ceiling, from which came a dim light: it was the bottom of a well, she realized.

On the ground there was a laying creature, apparently clinging to life, but it wasn't the tiger the child expected: while she approached, at first she thought it was a man in a clown costume, but then she noticed that its head, covered with orange, disheveled hair, was unnaturally big, and its eyes, which were fixed on her, were yellow and glowing like a cat's. The creature's scarlet lips were retracted to show a row of long, pointed fangs which weren't human in the least; from its gorge came that menacing sound which Momo mistook for a tiger's snarl.

The strange being roared again, with a clear intention to frighten the child, but the only emotion that he managed to arouse in her was pity: the creature was slumped to the ground with its cranium almost split in half, in a puddle of its very blood.

Without hesitation, the child got closer to try and help it, but when she was almost an arm away, the creature roared louder, trying to catch her with a quick movement of its very long-fingered, clawed hand – which looked just like a big, black spider –.

Watching that monstrous hand with fascination, Momo leaped out of its reach just in time.

Then the creature began to painfully crawl in the child's direction, growling and trying to capture her, its teeth bared, drool coming out

from a corner of its mouth, but once more she avoided its attacks, keeping just out of its range.

After a few minutes of that pathetic chase, the weird being seemed to have consumed its last bit of strength: once more, it collapsed belly down to the ground, moaning, its eyes closed and its breath labored.

Momo, moved to pity, started to approach, but the creature stiffened, once more ready to nab her, forcing her to back down again.

"You've got an ugly wound", the kid said then, her voice gentle, standing a few meters away from the creature. "You need to be bandaged, before you lose too much blood. You already lost a lot", she added worriedly.

At those words, the creature stopped its growling and stared incredulously at the child, its baleful grimace replaced with one of malicious entertainment.

"You want to *cure me*?!", it questioned. While it spoke, its voice was high-pitched and mocking, and it didn't sound anything like the beastly growl from before.

"Well, you're sick!", answered the kid, as if that explained everything.

"Don't you fear me?"

She answered with a baffled stare, as if she didn't quite understand his question. "You already lost too much blood", she repeated. "You have to be bandaged quickly".

The being was looking at her with a large smile, half amused and half ironic. "You don't even know what you're talking about", it snorted. "Stop playing doctor, Pierrot".

"I know what I'm talking about!", the child retorted. "And my name's not Pierrot. It's Momo".

"Pierrot suits you more", it said, its big, clownish smile still there.

"That's not true!"

"It is".

"It's not!"

"Is too!"

Momo stopped and stared at the creature, puzzled. "Doesn't... Doesn't it hurt?", she asked, worriedly gesturing towards its wound.

"What do you think?", it muttered sarcastically. "But *that* doesn't mean I'm going to let a five-year-old kid to put her hands on me". Its smile widened in a quite menacing grimace.

"I'm not five years old!", Momo protested. "I am... eight, I think".

"You *think*?"

"Well... I can't quite remember when is my birthday".

The creature snorted, amusedly. "And what's the difference? Eight, five... You're a baby anyway, a baby playing doctor".

"I'm not playing!", the child exclaimed. "Once... Once, Paula, our trapeze artist, fell and fractured her skull, and when the ambulance arrived they immediately bandaged her. They said they had to be quick. Now I don't have bandages with me, but... I have this!" Momo removed the little elastic kilt from her mime costume. "I'll ask for an ambulance, so that they can help you better".

"If you really care so much about helping me, *come here*", the creature hissed. "What I need right now is just a good *snack*". It crawled once more towards the child, trying to catch her, his face twisted in a fierce expression.

Momo obeyed, but not in the way the creature intended: she nimbly avoided its talons and climbed on its back, where its hands couldn't reach her. Once there, she started to dress its wound, carefully wrapping the fabric around its head.

At first, the creature tried to shake the child off, swearing harshly, but it got completely still and quiet the instant her hands came in contact with its nape, partly because it was exhausted, but also

because her gentle touch gave it one of the most pleasant and relaxing feelings it ever felt in its life.

When Momo finished that improvised bandage, she stepped away in few graceful hops, lingering not too far to stare curiously at the strange being.

The creature quietly returned the child's gaze. It felt a desperate wish to be touched that way again, and that annoyed it quite a bit.

"Are you the Clothes-Stealing Goblin?", the little one asked suddenly.

"The *what*?"

"The Clothes-Stealing Goblin", repeated her, solemnly. "Maruska said that at nightfall, on full moon nights, if the Goblin sees someone bathing in a river, he sneakily approaches them and... *wham!*, he steals each of their clothes to hide them in a secret lair, forcing them to go back home covering up with leaves and twigs. The Goblin never stole from me, though... To think I bathed in rivers many times, in the evenings", she added, her expression wishful.

The creature gazed at her in amazement, its mouth half-opened, and then it burst out in a high-pitched laugh, which ended almost immediately with a pained groan.

"No, I'm afraid I'm not the... Clothes-Stealing Goblin", it panted, its tone mocking, while it tried to ignore the pain. "I am more of a Child-Eating Monster. The clothes you saw in that big room, belonged once to all the children I ate. They all were children such as you", it added, looking at her with a ravenous smile.

Momo didn't even flinch, returning its gaze with curiosity, her fingers intertwined behind her back and her head tilted to one side. "What's your name?", she asked it after a little while.

"Pennywise, the Dancing Clown, at your service", it said, and then it tried to bow, despite being already slumped to the ground. Obviously, it didn't quite succeed.

The child chuckled at its antics. She pursed her painted lips, thoughtfully. "But then, are you the Dancing Clown or the Child-Eating

Monster?", she asked.

"A little bit of both", it answered with a mischievous smile. "I am the Dancing Clown until my prey gets close enough, and then I become the Child-Eating Monster".

She smiled. "Our circus' freaks also say they eat children, but none of that is true". She shrugged. "They actually eat the same food we do... Salads, french fries, hamburgers, cheeseburgers, donuts... I often watched them, and I never saw them eating a child. They say they do only to make me stay away. Some of them also have talons and fangs such as yours... But, none of them can roar like a tiger", she added, gazing at the creature with admiration. "How do you change your voice so much?"

"I can change my voice the way I want", Pennywise indifferently replied.

"Oh!", exclaimed the child, impressed. "I think you would be our freak show's star".

Its smile curved mischievously. "Oh, I don't doubt it..."

"Have you got more wounds, apart from that one?", she asked suddenly.

"My wounds are the sole reason I still haven't captured and devoured you", Pennywise mockingly retorted. "That said, are you really *sure* you want to speed up my recovery?"

She just watched him thoughtfully for a few seconds, and then her face lit up. "If you're hungry, I got those!", she exclaimed, taking out the box with the donuts. She put two of them in one of his clawed hands.

Surprised, the creature grabbed the sweets, forgetting to try and capture the child when she was close enough.

"If you taste Maruska's donuts, they're bound to become your favourite food", the kid added, sweetly. "I will bring you more, if you like, but right now I'd better call an ambulance".

Hearing those words, Pennywise' eyes widened and, despite being almost unable to move, the creature somehow succeeded to stand, wobbling and leaning against a wall.

"*Don't... you dare! Don't... No ambulances! No humans here!*", it growled, staggering and reaching out its hands towards the child. In that moment, its voice sounded just like the tiger's Momo mistook the being for.

The child stepped back, keeping out of reach, looking at the creature with both worry and pity. "But... you need treatment!", she whispered.

"*No! N... NO!*", it repeated, and it was so visibly desperate that the child raised her hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Ok, ok, if you really don't want me to, I won't do it... I won't call for an ambulance", she reassured it.

The creature was once more sprawled to the ground, moaning with pain.

Momo cautiously approached. "Is there... someone you want me to call for?"

"*No one. I told you to scram*", Pennywise snarled.

"But... what about you?"

"*I'll be fine. I merely need some time and rest*".

"That wound seems a bit too ugly to heal by rest alone", the child observed.

It opened its strange, yellow eyes to give her an intense stare. "*I'm not some fragile human being. Now leave me alone*".

Momo stared pensively at the creature for a little while. "I will bring real bandages and antiseptic", she finally said. "I'll be back soon!", she added, while she ran away.

The creature lay still, its eyes half-closed, listening to the child's

fading footsteps.

2. Chapter 2 - Reluctance

When Momo left, Pennywise simply stayed where he was; he was much too pained and tired to do anything more. He reflected on the last few events, wondering, for an instant, if he didn't imagine everything: did a young child really find him there, at the far end of that sewer, and, rather than run, did she really take the trouble to cure him? And she wasn't any child either: she was a *clown* child, no less. His angelic counterpart. If Divinities even existed, they were mocking him with admirable irony.

Pennywise took a deep breath and, by doing that, he smelled the chocolate icing's fragrance from the donuts which he still held in his hand, and also the delicate scent, much more appealing to him, coming from the fabric the sweet lambkin bandaged him with.

What an idiot I was, scaring her right away..., the monster-clown thought with regret. Why the heck didn't I wait to have caught her?

But yet, his pain and hunger were so strong that smelling that little human nearby made him momentarily lose his mind.

For a few moments, Pennywise imagined he could sink his teeth in that soft, delicious flesh, but he quickly dismissed that thought to avoid going completely crazy, and he bit one of the donuts instead. Human food really wasn't for him, but nonetheless, it would partially satiate his hunger, helping him to get better sooner.

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Late that night, the clown child showed up once more.

Pennywise first smelled her sweet scent, which vaguely reminded him of cinnamon, and, soon after, he heard her light footsteps coming closer and closer. Repressing a moan, he laid a hand on his aching stomach and, when he finally opened his eyes, he saw the child's small, graceful figure right in front of him. She was, once again, all in black and white, and her clown makeup was freshly retouched; she looked right like a child version of Pierrot.

"Pennywise, where are you?", Momo called him with her silvery voice, and he recalled that humans were practically blind in the dark.

Maybe I can make her come closer without her noticing me, enough to be able to catch her..., he thought, drooling and hoping his stomach wouldn't grumble too loudly.

"I brought you clean bandages and antiseptic. Oh, and food, too!", the child informed him in the meantime. Then, to his regret, she took out a small, electric camping lamp and switched it on, which allowed her to see him, huddled not too far, in the room's darkest corner.

"Leave me alone", Pennywise muttered as a greeting, much too tired to try and sound menacing. If he couldn't eat that child, he didn't want her anywhere close: being only able to smell her was pure agony.

"But I have to at least clean and dress your wound. You stopped me from calling an ambulance!", Momo retorted.

"I don't *need* it! I told you I'm no human being..."

"The fact you are a freak doesn't mean you don't need cares", she simply said, taking out

from her backpack everything she needed to treat him.

Pennywise wanted to tell her he wasn't a darn *freak* – how dared, that squirt, mistake him for a deformed human being?! –, but Momo was already getting closer, and suddenly he found himself too busy trying and catch her, although his attempts were slightly less decided than the day before: he wasn't *completely* against feeling once more that sweet touch of hers.

All in all, a treatment doesn't hurt, he thought, as if to justify himself while he surrendered.

Momo, for her part, avoided his talons in a few leaps, sat on his back as she did last time, and she took off the improvised bandage she put him before, in an extremely careful way. Then, she cleaned the wound and applied the new bandages.

"Your hair is funny", she commented after a while. "Oh, but you're not wearing makeup! This is your real color!", she added in wonder, touching the creature's strange skin.

"If you're finished, *beat it*", muttered the monster-clown in response but, despite his sulky attitude, he was almost sorry when she obeyed him.

"I brought more food", Momo announced, jumping at a safe distance from his claws. "Were the donuts good?"

"Not too bad, considering they were human food", said Pennywise.

At his unenthusiastic response, the child lowered her gaze, looking dejected. "Well, if you don't like donuts, this time I also brought hamburgers, popcorn and french fries", she said. "If there's something else you prefer, I can try and get it to you!"

He gave her a mischievous look, pursing his lips and swallowing to keep from drooling. "I would rather eat *you*", he informed her in a neutral tone.

Momo had the last reaction he expected: she chuckled. "No!", she answered.

"Why?", he asked, pretending to be baffled and hurt by her words.

"Because I'm not food!", she answered.

"Aren't you, now?"

"Nope. Well, now I have to go. I'm leaving you everything, so that you can choose". Momo waved to him, then she collected her little camping lamp from the ground and left, hopping away in that graceful way of hers, like a gazelle's.

A naive, little gazelle, taking care for a lion, Pennywise thought, not without some mirth. *Well, she's digging her own grave. I just have to hope her circus will leave Derry before I am strong enough to...*

He paused, thinking perplexedly about the last part of his inner monologue. Why would he ever hope for that delicious morsel to

escape him?

This wound is making me delirious, he concluded to himself.

He closed his eyes and, leaving aside any other reflection, he fell asleep soon after.

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When he woke up, Pennywise found himself waiting for the clown-child to arrive. Not that he had much else to do to kill the boredom, since even going for a walk was almost impossible a feat to him at the moment.

Well, I can't be that sure that she'll come back, he said to himself. *Children that young are fickle little things. Or maybe, she got some sense into herself and finally realized that taking care for a creature who defines himself a Child-Eating Monster is not the wisest thing to do...*

On the contrary, Momo did come back. She came at nightfall, and Pennywise noticed right away that her skips were not as lively as before, and there was a slight smell of blood coming from her body. Soon after, the monster-clown glimpsed a large bruise at her hairline, only partially hidden by the white greasepaint which she covered all her visible skin with. Nevertheless, her smile was as sweet as always, while she handed him new food boxes.

"Hi! This time I also brought chocolate waffels", she announced, and from her voice you couldn't tell there was anything amiss.

Pennywise looked her up and down. "What have you done?", he asked.

She stared back to him, baffled. "I brought you more food", she repeated. "You'll see, waffels are delicious! In any case, I also brought other things, in case you don't like waffels. Ah, and I also brought more bandages... They have to be changed often".

"I'm referring to that bruise you got there", the monster-clown said, making a vague gesture towards his neck.

Momo noticed that the bizarre freak's hands weren't clawed any more, nor were they strange in any way any more: in fact, they

looked like normal human hands, apart from the fact that they were white like the weird skin of his face.

"Oh, *this!*", Momo understood, touching the bruise in question. "It's no big deal... Popsy and Mr. Fin got angry because I stole a bit too much food these days. Look, I also brought mushroom soup", she added, taking out a lidded plastic container from her backpack. "Maruska cooked it, so it must be delicious".

"Who are Popsy and Mr. Fin?", Pennywise asked, ignoring the food being handed to him.

"Mr. Fin is my circus' director, and Popsy is one of the clowns", she answered, sitting down in front of the monster-clown, her legs crossed.

"And do they beat you a lot?"

"Oh, no, not that much!", Momo exclaimed. "They only do it when they manage to catch me. They rarely do... And in any case, the never beat me to the point that I can't do my performance".

Pennywise observed her for a while, in silence. He wondered why knowing that someone beat up that child disturbed him so; it certainly wasn't the first time he crossed paths with abused children, but since that moment he never cared about their troubles, except as ways to terrorize them senseless, before he ate them.

"Will they try and beat you again for stealing this stuff?", he asked, gesturing towards the coloured, carton boxes the child brought.

Momo shook her head, making her long light pigtails sway. "Nooo... Maruska gave me the soup in secret, Popsy and Mr. Fin don't know anything. And we have such a big supply of waffles, popcorn, french fries and drinks that no one is going to notice I took some. After you've eaten, I'll change your bandages, ok?"

The child said nothing more, merely observing him in silence, her head slightly tilted on one side in that particular way of hers.

Pennywise quietly looked her back, then he started to eat, if only to make his stomach stop growling.

"How did you hurt yourself so badly?", Momo suddenly asked.

He froze for a few moments, with a slight grimace. He wasn't too inclined to admit that a gang of children did that to him. "A stupid accident", he finally said.

To his relief, she seemed satisfied with that answer.

"You know, this evening I'll be doing my new performance!", she proudly said. "Mr. Fin said I'm ready. Look!" She took out five wooden balls from her backpack and she begun to skillfully juggle them; after a while, she abruptly threw them as high as she could, did a backflip and, while landing, she gracefully caught all the balls without dropping even one.

Pennywise was impressed, in spite of himself. "Not bad", he said.

Momo theatrically bowed, the way she did at the end of each performance, and then she gave him a guilty glance. "You know... I took these juggling balls from the pile in the big room", she said to the monster-clown. "They're yours, right?"

"In a sense", he answered with some irony.

"Well, when I'll leave, I'll be putting them back!", the child promised. "I just borrowed them, because I'm not allowed to carry around the circus' proprieties. Mr. Fin says I could lose them, or someone could need them in the meantime".

"Oh, for what I care, you can keep those bowls", Pennywise indifferently said.

She froze, taken by surprise.

"Keep them", the monster-clown repeated. "I don't need them".

"For real? They will be all mine?", Momo finally whispered, lighting up with joy.

"Yes, for real", Pennywise answered, amused by her enthusiasm.

"Oh...! Thank you!", the child exclaimed, and she put the juggling

balls in her backpack, handling them like they were the most precious treasure. "Were you part of a circus too?", she asked the freak-clown.

"Yes... I have been part of many".

"Oh! And what kind of shows did you do?"

"A bit of everything... I was an acrobat, a juggler, a clown, but mostly, I was a conjuror", he said, with a mischievous inflection while he listed that last ability.

She listened to him with a rapt expression. "Oh, you really can do a lot of things!", she exclaimed, but a second later, her enthusiasm cracked a little. "Well, if you're a juggler, you do need those bowls...", she observed.

Pennywise snorted. "I've got more, inside my wagon...", he said.

"Really?"

"Really".

"Well, when you'll feel better... will we perform together? Please...?", Momo begged him.

When I'll feel better, you'd better be far away from Derry, he thought, but he didn't say it. He felt quite torn between his impatience to feast on that succulent prey and a weird reluctance to do it. "How long is your circus staying?", he asked.

"Oh, it'll depend on the business. For now, things are going just fine, so nobody talks about leaving yet. I'm changing your bandage!", she added, when she noticed Pennywise finished eating. She skipped closer and, just like always, she climbed on his back.

While the child busied herself to untie the knot which fastened the previous bandage, the monster-clown closed his eyes and, almost without noticing, he fell asleep at her delicate touch.

3. Chapter 3 - Lucky charm

Pennywise woke up in the middle of the night, and he immediately noticed something pleasantly warm and soft, leaning against his back. It took him a few seconds to realize that Momo fell asleep on him, with her face buried in his hair and her slim arms circling his torso, almost as if she mistook him for a giant stuffed bear.

What the...?

Pennywise stiffened, his eyes opened wide, and he held his breath for a few moments. For a while, his mind was completely unable to grasp such an absurd and ridiculous situation.

Ok, now I've really seen everything, he said to himself.

And then it hit him: the child was finally at his mercy. At first, he was so astonished that he didn't even notice. But, despite everything, he hesitated.

What's up with me?

He usually didn't falter when being served such a tempting opportunity on a silver platter. Especially in his desperate condition. But yet, for some reason, the idea of Momo ending up in his stomach didn't seem so appealing anymore. And the reason for that was definitely *not* her not smelling tasty anymore: her scent was driving him absolutely *crazy*.

He glanced at her, swallowing.

Well, I suppose I can resist a little longer, he finally concluded to himself, and then he closed his eyes while resolutely ignoring his aching stomach.

After a few seconds, he fell asleep once more.

...

A few hours later, Momo abruptly sat up with a gasp.

Pennywise, awoken by her sudden movement, noticed that all at once the child's smell was imbued with terror, which made it absolutely *irresistible*. The monster-clown deeply inhaled and let out a low snarl, but despite that, once again he didn't give in to the impulse to immediately sink his teeth in that mouth-watering flesh, which was only a few centimeters away.

Momo was distracted, and didn't notice his growl, nor his ravenous expression. She was frantically looking around, her big grey eyes wide open, one of her pigtails a bit lopsided, and her clown makeup a little smeared on the side she leaned on.

"What's the matter?", Pennywise finally whispered, incredulously realizing that he wanted to pull her in, not to devour her, but rather to go back to sleep cuddling with her soft, warm, tiny body.

Momo hesitated. "I m-missed my p-performance", she stuttered in a very small voice. "I-I had to p-perform this evening, b-but... I f-fell asleep and I m-missed it! Th-They m-must be f- furious". She shed some tears, while she trembled.

Pennywise arched an eyebrow, quite amused. *My child*, he thought, *you fell asleep beside me, and now you're dying with fear at the mere idea of angering your human guardians?*

After a while, Momo reluctantly stood up. "I-I have to go... I'll c-come back as soon as possible", she promised, and she gave him a sweet smile, despite her obvious terror.

"Momo", Pennywise called her back.

"...Yes?"

He lingered for a bit, staring at her. Then he finally spoke. "In the big room, the one with the huge pile of clothes and toys", he said, "you'll find a red balloon. Bring it with you, it's a... a lucky charm. It'll protect you from those who want to hurt you".

Momo smiled, lighting up a little bit. "Oh... Ok! Thank you!... See you soon!", she said, and then she ran away.

Pennywise watched her go, feeling incredibly frustrated with himself.

What the heck am I doing...?

...

Back in the big room, Momo saw that there really was a red balloon, one of the elium-filled, floating ones. It was tied to one of the scattered toys on the ground.

Momo looked at the object, baffled: she didn't remember that balloon being there when she passed before.

The kid untied the balloon's string and, holding it in her hand, she exited the tunnels, feeling suddenly calm, despite knowing she would soon have to face Mr. Fin's and Popsy's ire. After all, even though her guardians were usually quite forgiving about her stealing some donuts, they surely wouldn't be about her missing her performance. There was no doubt about that.

...

When she arrived at her circus' camp, Momo headed towards the main tent, the biggest one, which usually hosted the show. Some acrobats were already there, practicing their performance of that evening.

Suddenly, Popsy came out of nowhere. He wore his usual coloured clown costume, and his green, curly wig.

"Where have you been?", he exclaimed. "We have looked everywhere for you! You had to perform yesterday evening!"

"I-I'm sorry, Popsy!", Momo contritely answered. "I-I fell asleep and... I didn't realize..."

"Ah, it doesn't matter", he interrupted her. "You're going to perform this evening, you better not disappear again! Mr. Fin is waiting to see your dress rehearsal".

Momo didn't even have time to get surprised at her colleague's unusually calm demeanour: in that moment, the circus' director appeared, with his purple top hat and his well-cared-for salt and pepper beard. "Ah, Momo!", he said, the second he saw the child. "We

were wondering where you were. Come, quickly! Let me see your performance. Yesterday we replaced your show with Maruska's, which was to be this evening... Later, you're going to perform in her place, all right?".

"Ok!", Momo exclaimed, relieved. She couldn't believe her guardians were so singularly gentle... The lucky charm Pennywise gave her really worked!

By the way, where is the balloon?, Momo asked herself, only then realizing that, in her distraction, she let go of its string.

She worriedly looked for the flying object with her gaze and, much to her amazement, she saw it right there beside her: its string wasn't attached to anything, but despite that, the balloon floated always at the same height, and it appeared to be following Momo. After a while, it headed towards a nearby pole and it tied itself up there, all by itself, as though it were alive. Then, it simply stayed there, like a quiet observer.

Mr. Fin and Popsy seemed not to even notice the presence of the floating magic object, despite it being right in front of their eyes.

"Well, what are you gawking at? Are you going to show me your performance or what?", the circus' director blurted.

"Yes!", Momo immediately answered, hurrying to obey.

...

In the meantime, Pennywise was absently listening to the soft water noise which was the only sound breaking the silence of his lair. He was thinking about the spell he had cast to help Momo, and he was quite stunned about his own actions.

That was stupid... Why the heck did I do that?, he said to himself. *I don't even have energy to spare at the moment, and such an emotional manipulation requires quite a few...*

But despite everything, he felt an inexplicable relief knowing Momo's guardians wouldn't be able to beat her anymore, at least as long as she stayed in Derry and she kept the red balloon nearby.

He lingered for some time, pondering, while he stretched his stiff limbs. He really was sick of being stuck there, so he cautiously stood up, noting with relief that he felt much better, despite being hungrier than ever, thanks to that *stupid* spell.

He staggered a bit, laying a hand on his stomach.

It's about time I get a decent meal, he said to himself.

By that, he obviously meant *children*.

At the very thought, he felt his mouth water, while his stomach growled even louder. Impatiently quivering, the moster-clown walked then along the tunnels, his senses on high alert. He was ready for the hunt.

...

Later that evening, Momo came back to the sewers. She seemed tired but happy, her makeup smudged, her hair a bit disheveled. She held the red balloon by its string.

The child found the moster-clown in his usual place, at the bottom of the well. Just like the other times, the only thing she could see at first were his glowing yellow eyes gazing at her from the darkness. From their position, however, the child realized that he wasn't laying on the ground anymore: once she got used to the murky atmosphere, she saw that he was sitting cross-legged, with his back against one of the stone walls.

"So! How was your performance?", Pennywise cheerfully asked her. He seemed to feel decidedly better.

"Oh, it was fine!", Momo exclaimed, spinning with joy. "You know... Popsy and Mr. Fin weren't angry in the least! They didn't even scold me! Your lucky charm really worked! It really protected me! You are a great wizard! How did you do that? Huh? Could you teach me, please?" She gave him a look full of admiration.

The more Momo's eyes got used to the darkness, the more Pennywise's features became clearer: after a while, the child was able to discern his ruffled orange hair and his wide scarlet smile. For a

moment, she even thought she saw some kind of dark liquid dripping from a corner of his mouth, but he passed his tongue over there in a flash, making the weird substance disappear before she could see it better. He had quite a snakelike tongue, she noticed: it was incredibly long, cylindrical and pointed.

"It's a secret", Pennywise whispered, answering the kid's question. "Nobody ever revealed that to me either".

"Why?"

"Because I have always been able to do tricks such as these, but I can't explain how".

For a moment, she looked a little disappointed, but almost immediately she lit up once more. She gave Pennywise an awed glance. "You know, I never saw wizards who were able to charm people into being calmer, especially if it was people like Popsy and Mr. Fin!" She kept silent for a little while. "Is it... *real* magic?", she finally asked, in a whisper.

He stretched out his long legs, crossing his feet. "It depends on what you mean by "real magic"..."

"Well... I mean magic which works with no cheating!", Momo answered, her head tilted to one side and her hands gracefully entwined behind her back. "I mean, magic which makes something *really* happen, without any need for boxes with hidden compartments, or stuff like that... Jedi, our wizard, performs incredible magic, but he always uses tricks such as those".

Pennywise raised an eyebrow. "Oh, there's no cheating, I assure you... As long as you keep that balloon and you don't leave Derry, your little friends won't be able to hurt you. Well, in the physical sense, at least".

At those words, Momo looked at a loss for words, simply watching him in silence.

Pennywise looked her back, uncertain. Her gaze of pure adoration made him feel quite awkward, and once more, he had no idea what

to think or feel.

"I brought you more food and bandages!", she announced after a while, putting an end to his confusion. She pulled out from her backpack everything she needed to treat him, then she approached and gave him a hesitant glance. "I'll need you to lower yourself, otherwise it will be a struggle... Even sitting down on the floor, you're really tall, you know?"

"I already told you I don't need treatment", Pennywise said in a distant tone, but Momo didn't listen to him, which was pretty much her usual way: even before he finished talking, she was already intent on loosening the bandage she put on him the day before.

As soon as her hands touched him, any further protest died on the monster-clown's lips. Closing his eyes, he casually lowered himself, to make her work easier.

When she finished taking off his old bandages, Momo let out a surprised sound. "Oh! Your wound is almost healed!", she exclaimed.

"I told you it wasn't a serious injury", was his reply.

"Well, if you continue like this, I won't need to treat you anymore", the child observed, never showing any sign of disquiet at his latest weird peculiarity.

When Momo finished treating him, she fetched her backpack and, while the monster-clown absently watched her, she pulled out her culinary gifts of that day: two hot dogs, french fries, some donuts and a fairly big plastic container which, according to the child, was full of an excellent fruit smoothie.

For a short while, Pennywise contemplated telling her he just filled his belly on half a dozen nice and plump children, but for some reason he didn't feel much like scaring her anymore.

The kid placed the food beside him, then she quietly lingered, looking uncertain. "...Pennywise?"

"...Yes?", he said.

"May I... M-May I sleep here with you?"

Her request astounded him. "...Why?", he whispered.

The child still looked nervously at him. "I don't know! I-I'd only like... to stay here with you. Please...?", she stammered.

He stared at her, once more caught off guard. In truth, he didn't mind too much the idea of feeling once more the pleasant warmth of the child cuddling beside him, but he would rather *die* than admit it. Despite that, after much fidgeting, he finally opened his arms towards the child as he shrugged, averting his gaze. Those gestures were almost invisible, but Momo instantly understood: lighting up, she quickly laid down beside him, her head on his chest and her slim arms circling his waist.

Pennywise jumped at her enthusiasm, and he lingered for a while, perfectly still. Then, as he closed his eyes, he laid an almost reluctant hand on her back, as light as a feather.

4. Chapter 4 - Weakness

Momo woke up very early in the morning: it wasn't dawn yet, when Pennywise felt her small form stretch slightly in his arms, trying to stand up.

"What's up?", the monster-clown whispered.

"I have to go back to camp", Momo answered, her voice equally low. "They better not notice me wandering around at night... And, should I not be ready at seven o'clock to deal with business and rehearse my performance, they'd get real mad".

After few seconds of hesitation, he reluctantly let her go.

"I'll be back soon!", the child promised, and then she did something Pennywise didn't expect at all, leaving him dumbfounded: she bent down and quickly kissed him on the cheek. Then she hopped away, pulling the red balloon with her.

...

A few hours later, at around seven, Popsy's and Mr. Fin's voices woke Momo up once more: they were right outside the caravan she slept in – the one she shared with Popsy – and they were deeply engaged on some matter.

The child jumped down from her bed, put on her shoes, and exited the mobile house.

Not too far, she noticed Maruska too: she was intent on cooking some pancakes on a camping stove, and she wore her long, tawny hair in a messy braid. She was obviously listening to the two men's conversation, and she looked just as disturbed.

Momo approached the trio, with Pennywise's red balloon cheerfully bobbing in her wake. The weird object had been her shadow throughout all the previous day, and it didn't take long for Momo to notice that it was invisible to everyone, except to her.

"Hi!", Momo greeted.

The others answered absentmindedly, then went back right away to their discussion; they were talking about an article from the local newspaper, which Popsy held in his hand.

"Six! Can you believe this? *Six*, all in *one night!*", Popsy exclaimed. "And, according to this, they were with their parents, and the second they got distracted... *wham!* All disappeared without a trace! And from different parts of the town too!"

Mr. Fin nodded, frowning. "Yes, you can't even think they're all playing hide-and-seek together..."

"Never heard of such a thing", Maruska whispered, horrified.

In that moment, Popsy seemed to notice for the first time the presence of Momo. "Hey, you, sweetheart, you better not run about too much around here", he told her. "Yesterday evening, six children vanished without a trace. Look". He showed her the newspaper, where Momo could see the pictures of four little boys and two little girls, with their faces all chubby and smiling.

"Oh, come on, stop scaring her!", Maruska exclaimed, snatching the newspaper from his hand.

"I'm just warning her. Six children just disappeared in the same night!", Popsy retorted.

"All right, that's enough", Mr. Fin blurted. "Momo, go get ready for your show... These days we're performing in the mornings and at midday too. This place is not all bad, in fact our earnings are quite good... Who knows, this Derry could become our permanent residence!"

"Bah, as if we're cut out for permanent residences!", Popsy huffed, taking back the newspaper from Maruska.

"Not to mention, that's what you tell us about *every single place* we stop at...", she added in an ironic tone.

Momo didn't hear anything more: she was heading back to the caravan to comb her hair and put on her makeup. She knew from experience, she'd better not hesitate when Mr. Fin requested

something.

While she was readying herself for her performance, she thought about those children's sweet, round faces on the newspaper; their disappearance made her feel sad, rather than scared. Momo really hoped they were fine.

...

Pennywise, in the meantime, was thoughtfully wandering in the big room in the middle of the sewage plant, the place where he amassed all of the clothes and toys from his victims. He absently glanced to that heterogeneous pile of objects, then he headed towards his wagon and opened it: it was full of colorful boxes and trinkets, besides a bed which the monster-clown hadn't slept in for a very long time.

The wagon was completely invisible to adult human beings, thanks to a spell Pennywise cast to make sure the maintenance workers wouldn't take away his stuff – not that he had any use for those old knick-knacks, those days, but that didn't mean he would let someone steal them –. That illusion of invisibility didn't work on children, because Pennywise couldn't see the point in that: after all, if some child was to tell that he saw a wagon which was invisible to grown-ups, who would believe him? Not to mention that tricking a child required much more powerful spells, for which the monster-clown would consume a huge amount of energy: cubs were gifted with a natural talent to see the truth behind the illusions and, even to him, it was almost impossible to deceive that sharp a sight.

Pennywise rummaged into the boxes, until he found what he'd been looking for: fifteen juggling balls, which he took one by one and started to skillfully throw in the air as he exited the wagon. He let out an enthusiastic smile, seeing that in all that time his skill hadn't rusted at all.

He didn't lie, when he told Momo that many years prior he had been a professional clown: the typical, wandering life of circuses had been pretty useful to him, since it was difficult to live in the same place for too long without its inhabitants noticing that he fed on their children. He lived that way for long years, until he got to Derry, which at the time of his arrival wasn't much more than a hamlet with a maze of

intricate tunnels traversing its whole underground perimeter. From the very beginning, those galleries turned out to be the ideal lair for a creature such as Pennywise: you could reach them through secret passages which were scattered everywhere in the town, and observing the inhabitants' lives from there was a piece of cake. Furthermore, even long before those tunnels were turned into a sewage system, almost nobody ventured in there, unless they were assassins, spies or someone involved in illicit activities. That meant the place was always about deserted.

Once settled there, Pennywise didn't take long to become the actual lord of Derry, the master puppeteer pulling its strings behind the scenes. Preventing the inhabitants from noticing his presence had been pretty easy: the one thing Pennywise learned the most about human beings, was their natural tendency to not want to see things which were beyond their control and their comprehension, and that definitely included him too. A simple wide-ranging emotional manipulation was enough to completely divert people's attention from anything which could potentially lead them to him. He didn't even have to consume too much energy and, in more than a century, nobody did virtually anything to solve the constant disappearance cases. Oh, yes, they were always mentioned on television news, and also also on the headlines of local newspapers, but that was all. Investigations were always conducted from the assumption of the kidnapper being a human and, if someone did notice something that didn't fit with that assumption, they simply disregarded it.

The first ones to try and find the real cause of those tragedies were the very people who wounded Pennywise, those youngsters who curiously named their gang "Losers". They were the only ones to really resist the monster of Derry. Of course, they didn't manage to kill him as they wished, but that didn't mean they didn't cause him a great deal of trouble, including the unsettling feeling of not being as strong as he had originally thought. And that feeling of weakness got even worse the moment that annoying child-clown appeared: she was so inexplicably kind and loving, and so completely *blind* to all – obvious! – evidence of how much of a danger a creature like him was to a delicious morsel such as her... and Pennywise, rather than devour her – which would have been the logical course of action –, ended up using his magic to protect her. Since his final battle with

the Losers, which was only two scanty weeks prior, it was like his whole world turned completely upside-down.

Deep in thought, Pennywise kept juggling, performing even a series of virtuositities which, back in his time, managed to elicit a lot of stunned reactions. He was so focused, he didn't even notice Momo entering the room and lingering just before him, quietly observing his show with an expression of pure worship.

When the monster-clown stopped the juggling balls one after another, he bowed as though he was before an audience – even though he didn't realize he actually was –, and Momo begun to enthusiastically clap, making him jump.

"Bravo! Bravo!", the child exclaimed, skipping back and forth. "Can you use an aerial hoop too? And what about a trapeze? And... And... a tightrope? Can you balance on one? With an unicycle?"

He smiled. "I learned a bit of this and that..."

"Oh, I would just *love* to perform together with you!", the child sighed, still with that eager expression.

Pennywise shrugged. "Why not?"

At those words, Momo ran to him and, for an instant, he found himself hugged at knee height, before the child went back to joyfully dancing and jumping around.

"Yay!", Momo exclaimed. "But, we will have to wait until later... You know, today I'll be performing at midday too". She paused. "Would you like... to watch us? We'll be performing nearby... At the very beginning of the forest". She hopefully waited for his answer.

"Yes, I know", he told her.

Momo opened her eyes wide. "Huh? You mean... you've already been at our shows?"

"Nope... But the thing is, in Derry it's almost impossible for something to happen without me knowing".

For a few moments they looked at each other in silence, uncertain, and once more, Pennywise's mind couldn't help but notice how bizarre an occurrence it was to be face to face with a little human *without* wishing to eat her – and not because she didn't smell absolutely *delish* –.

Well, I just ate six children, he reasoned. *That was more than satisfactory a meal.*

"May I see your wound?", Momo shyly asked after a little while, bringing him back to reality.

He lingered a bit, then he shrugged and, smiling ironically, he lowered himself to allow the child to get to the bandages wrapping his head.

In truth, Pennywise knew his wound was fully healed since several hours – thanks to his recent feast –, and he himself couldn't figure out the reason why he still wore those bandages, which were completely useless by now. Neither did he *quite* understand why, just as Momo tried to take away the gauzes, he was intent on using his magic to prevent her from finishing the job too quick, discreetly fastening each knot she managed to loosen...

"I really can't remember doing *this* many knots, last time", Momo observed after a while, in a tone of innocent puzzlement, as she pulled once more one of the edges of fabric, trying to untie a knot which wouldn't cooperate.

Then, she froze, noticing the soft vibration coming from the monster-clown's throat, and she gave him an amazed glance.

"You... You're *purring*?", she whispered, delighted.

The sound instantly ceased, and Pennywise glanced at the child, looking both embarrassed and alarmed. "I'm not".

Momo giggled. "You were! You were purring, just like a cat!"

"I *wasn't*".

"You totally were!"

"No, I tell you!", he blurted. Then, saying nothing more, he abruptly stood up, as he resolutely turned his back to the child and went back to his juggling.

"Wait! I still haven't finished taking off your bandage!", Momo protested. "I have to check if you still need treatment!"

"I don't. Look", the freak-clown said, his tone distant. He caught all the balls, laid them on the ground and then he slightly yanked at his bandages, which came off just like that: all the knots seemed to untie themselves at his simple touch. And the child could clearly see the skin of his head being perfectly even: there wasn't the smallest trace of that wound, which only two days prior seemed to almost split his skull in half.

Adding nothing more, Pennywise went back to skillfully juggling, feigning utter indifference. In truth, he was acutely aware of Momo's expression while she looked at him, both in admiration of his skills and a little hurt for being dismissed in such brusque a way.

The child, for her part, as used as she was to Popsy's and Mr. Fin's antics, could tell when to leave someone alone; so, after lingering for just a second longer, she headed towards the exit of the tunnels, with her red balloon in tow, as always. But as she left, she glanced one last time at her bizarre monter-clown friend, who still looked deeply immersed in his pastime.

"See you soon, Pennywise!", she sweetly said, waving him off.

...

When Momo left, Pennywise let the colorful bowls fall to the ground one after the other; he kept throwing the last one in the air for a few seconds, his gaze absently focused on nothing in particular, and then he unexpectedly burst into mad laughter, doubling over and almost choking.

"I was actually *purring!*", he mocked himself in between laughs. "*Ha!* The irony! Absolutely *priceless!*" He kept cackling madly for a while, and then he quieted, as he mentally retraced Momo's last visit. He felt a weird mixture of sadness, embarrassment and some sort of intense

longing for something he himself couldn't quite grasp, and all those emotions bewildered and frightened him as much as they amused him.

As if I could ever be friends with a human...

He reflected a few seconds longer, then he let out a little sigh as he gazed to the light filtering from the ceiling of the huge room.

It's almost midday, he said to himself. All in all, it's not a bad idea swinging by the circus show... If they're performing now, it'll be packed with tasty food.

Despite not being hungry in the least, the thought of delicious little humans made his stomach growl. Licking his lips, Pennywise retrieved his juggling balls and he put them back in the box he took them from; then he set out along the tunnels, towards the water drainage nearest to the place where he knew he would be able to see the colorful, tall circus tent.

5. Chapter 5 - Join us

Momo was alone in her caravan, and she was putting the finishing touches to her makeup in view of her performance. She was feeling quite blue.

On her way back to her circus' camp, the child crossed paths with trapeze artists Paula and Martha, who were talking about the six disappeared children of the previous evening: hearing that ugly story once more, and knowing that no one of the children had been found yet, made Momo feel really sad.

The child was about to open the door to exit the caravan, but someone beat her to it, and that someone was Maruska.

"Momo? Are you ready?", the woman asked sweetly, as she appeared at the cabin's entrance.

Maruska was also ready to perform: she wore her usual skintight, yellow and blue catsuit, and her tawny hair was up in a bun with a yellow rose ornament attached, the edges of which petals were adorned with glitter. The tightrope walker's stage makeup and costume were decorated with glittery stripes too.

Seeing the child's disconsolate demeanour, Maruska looked worriedly at her. "Hey, are you ok?", she whispered. "You're still thinking about that newspaper article, aren't you?"

Momo nodded, trying not to cry: there was no time left to fix her makeup, should she ruin it.

"I'm here with you, ok?", Maruska told her with a comforting smile. "Should anyone try and harm you, they'll have to deal with me first! And I'll definitely kick their butt!" She laid a hand on her heart, and her expression was so funny that Momo couldn't help but grin a little.

"There it is, that beautiful smile of yours", Maruska said then, caressing the child's cheek affectionately. "I was wondering where it went! Oh, now that I think about it, I've got something for you... Wait a minute!"

The woman exited the caravan, and a few minutes later she came back with a pot full of glitter and the adhesive to attach it. Approaching the child, Maruska used the sheeny powder to enrich the kid's makeup and costume.

"There you go!", she finally said, quite satisfied. "Sometimes we have to light up a little bit, don't you think?" She winked. "Come on, let's go and mesmerize them all!"

Momo followed her colleague outside the caravan and into the main tent, where the show had already begun.

At their sight, Mr. Fin motioned for them to come closer. "Momo, you're the next one! Get ready!", he said.

The child nodded, as Maruska touched her shoulders encouragingly. The previous performance was ending in that very moment and, in between the audience's cheering, the circus' director straightened his top hat as he went back under the spotlight.

"And now, prepare to behold an incredible aerial performance by one of our youngest artists!", Mr. Fin announced. "Ladies and gentlemen, meet our little angel, Momo!"

He made a wide gesture towards the child, who smiled as the spotlight reached her, dazzling her slightly and making the glitter sparkle.

Momo bowed gracefully, then she started to climb the tall ladder leading to the springboard from which she was to jump to reach the aerial hoop her performance of that day was based on. Even the circular steel apparatus was covered with glitter which shined as it was illuminated.

Momo leaped nimbly from the springboard, got a hold of the hoop and hauled herself on it as if it was a swing; then she lowered her eyes on the crowd watching her from the auditorium, and her smile widened considerably as she spotted a tall, familiar orange-haired clown in a silver-white costume with orange pompon buttons, standing a little apart from the rest of the audience.

Pennywise, for his part, waved at her, smiling his big, mischievous smile, and the kid winked in return. Then, Momo turned to Maruska, who was waiting right below her: when her colleague was certain the child's focus was on her, she started to throw some coloured bowls, which Momo caught and began to juggle expertly. Then, as she kept juggling, the little acrobat changed her position on the loop with quick, lithe movements, sometimes while swinging.

At the end of her coreography, Momo stopped the juggling balls and leaped once more on the springboard, then, as the audience applauded enthusiastically, she bowed and climbed down the ladder. On the ground, she was greeted by Maruska, who picked her up and started spinning madly on the spot.

"My little angel!", the woman exclaimed. "You did just great!"

"Maruska, stop with the sappy nonsense and get ready, the next one going's you", Mr. Fin interrupted in a dry tone.

"Oh, come on, I *told* you I'm ready!", Maruska protested, putting down the kid. "How many times are you gonna ask?"

Mr. Fin ignored her: he was back under the spotlight, introducing Maruska's show.

Momo gave the tightrope walker a gesture of victory, which she returned in the very moment the spotlight switched to her, turning her in a sparkling fairy.

As Maruska bowed and began to climb the tall ladder, with the spotlight following her, Momo looked around, searching for Pennywise, whom she couldn't see anywhere anymore.

The child went out into the open, then she started calling softly for the monster-clown. And then, suddenly, she spotted him on the very top of the big tent she exited just a moment ago: he was waving cheerfully at her, hanging off the chasm as he held on to the flagpole – which was far too thin to be able to bear his weight, but still seemed to bear it effortlessly, for whatever strange reason –.

Momo looked at Pennywise, wide-eyed. "How did you get up there?",

she exclaimed.

That tent, in fact, was so tall and steep that the only way to reach its top was to climb up very tall ladders. But Momo couldn't see any of those nearby: apparently, they were never moved from the trucks they were in.

"Why, I floated, of course", Pennywise answered, as if it was perfectly natural. "Come on up! The view's quite nice from here".

"But, I don't know how to float!", the child answered.

His smile got even wider; he looked quite entertained. "You were doing just that, a few minutes ago", he said.

Momo chuckled. "I wasn't floating! I was hanging by the aerial hoop!"

"Well, what's the difference?", Pennywise asked, as he pirouetted on the spot.

Momo was about to tell him that there was *quite* a big difference, but in that moment she felt strangely light and, looking down at herself, she realized that her feet weren't touching the ground anymore: she was actually *floating*, higher and higher, just like an elium-filled balloon.

She let out a surprised sound, which morphed quickly into a squeal of joy, as she kept flying upwards.

After a while, she found herself drifting right in front of a smirking Pennywise: taking her hand, the monster-clown helped her settle right next to him, on the narrow wooden platform which was the tent's highest point.

"You see? A piece of cake", he said airily.

At the very moment when the child's feet were on the platform, she raised her gaze and let out an amazed sound at the sight of the city from that new point of view. "Wow...!"

"You like it?", Pennywise asked.

Momo nodded, mesmerized, keeping her wide-eyed stare on the horizon. "It's weird... Everything seems way smaller from here...!", she whispered.

The monster-clown snorted, amusedly. "We're not that high either... I can't believe an aerial acrobat like yourself is getting this flabbergasted over a mere one-hundred-feet-high view!"

"I've never climbed up the tent from *outside*. From the inside it's quite different... You can't see that far away", the child explained.

There was a brief pause.

"Pennywise...?", Momo called shyly, after a while.

"Mmh?"

"...Well, this morning you told me that... that whatever happens in Derry, you always know. Right?"

He paused, as he stole a furtive glance at the child: she was looking at him pleadingly, with her grey eyes open wide.

"Well... Usually, yes", he answered cautiously.

"Is it magic too?"

He shrugged. "You can see it as such, yes".

She bit her lower lip, looking anxious. "Well... Then... W-Would you be able to find those children? I mean, the ones... who disappeared yesterday evening? If they... are in danger, and you can tell the police where they are... they... th-they could be saved and brought back to their parents!"

Hearing her plea, he tensed up, barely managing to hide his unease behind a jolly smile. At the same time, he had to refrain from bursting into laughter at his own sadness at seeing Momo so worried for those children.

Well, what did I expect?, he internally scoffed, bitterly. *Did I really think a kind-hearted little lambkin such as her wouldn't even flinch in the*

face of six of her peers disappearing?

"I'm afraid I have no idea where they are... Magic doesn't always work", he then lied to her, starting to swing on the spot in a feigned carefree way, hanging on the tent top flag. "I wouldn't worry if I were you, though", he added. "They're probably just playing a game. Children do that a lot, around here... They disappear for a few days, and then they reappear, just like that. It's quite common, really".

"Really?", Momo asked, puzzled.

"Of course!", Pennywise nodded.

The kid lingered for a few moments, her expression wistful, pursing her lips. "But... why would they play such games? They aren't funny at all", she finally observed.

"Why, indeed?", he answered indifferently. "Maybe because they're bored. Or maybe, they merely want to call for attention". Then, without waiting for the child's answer, he picked her up and, holding her tightly, he quickly jumped down from the tent top.

Momo, taken by surprise, let out a terrified scream which lasted just half a second, because after that, they had already landed on the ground with surprising ease: the child barely felt any impact, and her fear passed as quickly as it had appeared. She cracked up, and Pennywise did the same.

"Yay! Let's do that again!", Momo exclaimed, when she calmed down.

"You got it!", the monster-clown answered cheerfully, feeling relieved he managed to distract her from the subject of the disappeared children. And just like that, he fled once more on the top of the tent, and then down, in between the child's excited squeals.

When Pennywise's feet were on the ground once more, Momo looked around, a bit concerned. "You know, I... I'd better go back inside, right now", she said. "They could need me. Will I find you here, in a while?"

"Oh, I don't think I'll be far away...", he said.

"Ok, see you soon, then!", Momo exclaimed, and then she jumped down from his arms and disappeared inside the great tent.

...

Later, when the shows were interrupted for lunch, Momo found Pennywise busy juggling fifteen small hula hoops he probably found inside the little tent nearby, which served as a storage room.

The child approached shyly and, just as the monster-clown noticed her presence, he grinned and started to throw at her some of the hoops he was performing with.

Momo, delighted, didn't take long to figure out that game: catching the toys, she made them spin in the air once and then threw them back at Pennywise, who did exactly the same, spinning them once in the air and then throwing them back at her.

They went on like that for a while, then the monster-clown reached a box nearby and, as he kept juggling, he began to extract more hula hoops, adding them to their game.

"Hey...!", Momo squealed, giggling uncontrollably as she tried not to drop the hoops being thrown at her. "N-No! W-Wait! They're too many! I can't... I can't juggle all of them!"

"Oh, yessss, you can!", Pennywise replied, in an impish tone, as he caught each hoop which she didn't manage to catch. He was laughing like crazy too.

After a while, Momo couldn't take it anymore, and all the hula hoops were instantly seized by Pennywise, who continued to juggle *twenty-two* hoops for a few moments, his hands flashing with an inhuman deftness.

Sitting on the ground, gasping, with her makeup a bit smudged with sweat, Momo let out a stupefied exclamation as she watched that incredible performance.

In the end, Pennywise stopped the hula hoops, making them hook gracefully onto his arms as they fell – exactly eleven each arm – and, as the last hoop landed precisely at its place, there was an

enthusiastic ovation, making both performers jump: no one of them had noticed the little crowd gathered around them in the meantime, to watch that improvised show.

Before long, Mr. Fin popped out of the group, and he gave the bizarre clown a curious look. "Who's your friend?", he asked, addressing Momo.

"Pennywise, the Dancing Clown", Momo answered solemnly, nodding towards the monster-clown. "Pennywise, meet Mr. Fin, the circus' director".

"Pennywise?", said Mr. Fin. "Nice stage name. May I ask what do they call you off stage?"

Pennywise lingered for a few seconds. "...Robert Gray", he finally answered, extending a perfectly human hand to Mr. Fin, who smiled as he grasped it.

Only then, Momo noticed, quite amazed, that the monster-clown lost all of his monstrous traits: his eyes were bright blue rather than yellow, his teeth weren't pointed nor sharp anymore, and his head didn't appear so excessively big. He looked just like a perfectly human man in a clown costume.

"Well, Mr. Robert Gray", said Mr. Fin, "you managed to impress me. And *I assure you* that's not that simple a feat. Are you from around here?"

"Oh, I've lived in Derry for a century, give or take a few years", Pennywise answered as he gave a sly smile.

"And, how would you like to be a part of my circus? We would welcome gladly such an amazing juggler".

Pausing a little, Pennywise glanced at Momo, who was looking hopefully at him with a love so pure and overt, such as only a child could be able to express.

Seeing that look on her face, the monster-clown felt his own heart contract in a bizarre way, both sweet and painful, and for an instant he was almost overtaken by the impulse to accept Mr. Fin's offer right

away.

This is idiocy, Pennywise thought right next, mocking himself. *How do you think this will end, huh? She won't take forever to realize that you feed on her species. And then, do you really think she'll still love you that much? Ha!*

"You don't have to answer immediately", Mr. Fin suddenly said, bringing Pennywise back to reality. "Would you like to join us for lunch?", he added courteously.

The monster-clown averted his gaze from the child, keeping his thoughts and emotions hidden carefully behind his big, clownish smile. "Thanks, but I've already eaten", he answered in a tone which was once more imbued with a subtle irony.

"Well, you'll be free to change your mind, as long as there'll be something left", was Mr. Fin's dry answer. "Anyway, even if you choose not to be a part of our troupe, if you wish to join the shows, you'll be gladly welcomed, as long as we'll stay here in Derry. In that case, you know where to find us, all right?"

That said, the circus' director lifted his hat slightly, as he took his leave.

The people gathered around them was also dispersing: some were heading towards the stands selling popcorn, french fries, donuts and cotton candy, with their kids almost dragging them, despite being warned that they wouldn't be allowed to eat those treats until *after* lunch; others were heading towards the animals' cages instead, watching mesmerized this or that wild beast.

Lowering his gaze, Pennywise noticed Momo being still there: she was looking hesitantly at him, with her little hands entwined behind her back, and her head tilted to one side.

"Will we meet later?", the child asked in her usual sweet tone.

Pennywise's emotions were still a bit in turmoil, and this resulted in his antics becoming more clownish than ever: with wide, theatrical movements, he bowed before the little acrobat, handing elegantly out

to her a beautiful red rose he materialized an instant prior. And, as Momo took it, she realized that flower was a sugar sculpture, absolutely *perfect* to its smallest detail.

For a little while, Momo couldn't help but look at that work of art, almost holding her breath. Then, when she lifted her gaze with the intention of thanking Pennywise, she noticed that the bizarre clown wasn't anywhere to be seen. He seemed to have vanished into thin air.